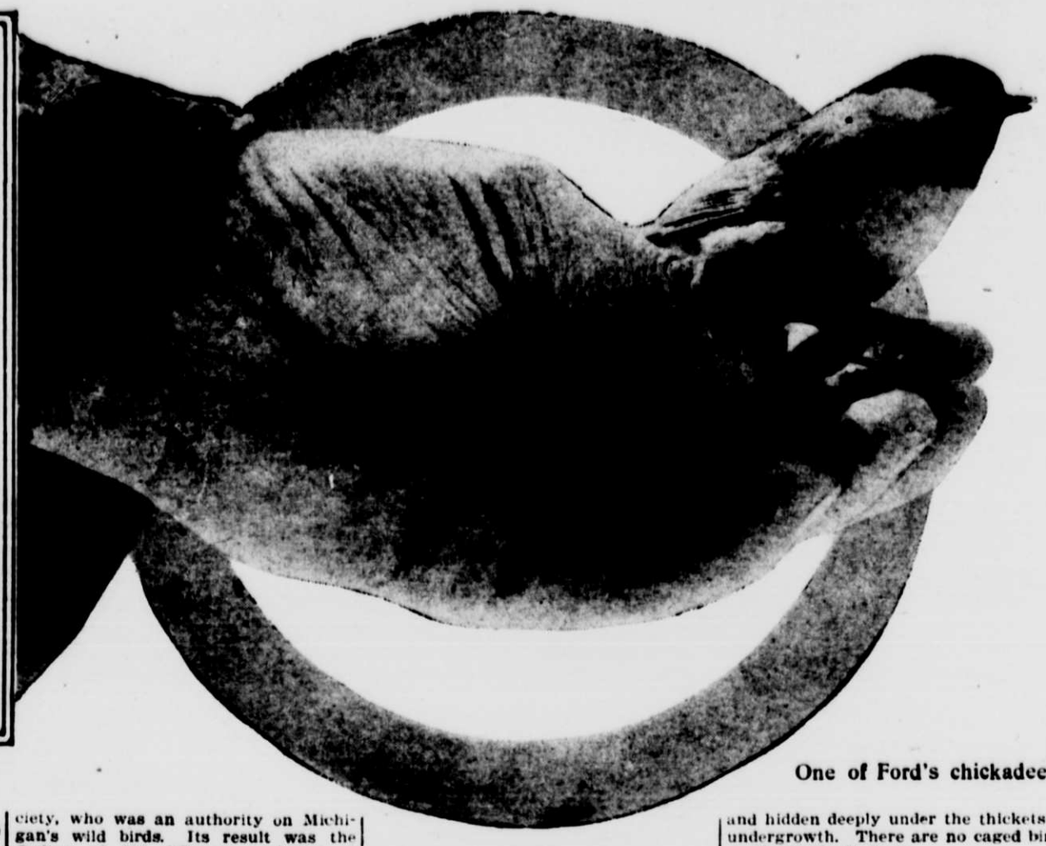
FORD'S FARM A LITTLE PARADISE FOR BIRDS

Red headed woodpeck r with chunk of suet.



One of Ford's chickadees.

Hairy woodpecker.

Feathered Folk of Michigan Flock to Automobile Man's Estate Near Detroit for Food and Shelter

EVERY morning last winter a small auto wagon stopped before a certain bakery in Detroit. Two employees brought out a deep basket of the sort in which bread is carried. There was a mouth watering but very unbreadlike smell about the basket. It was wedged into the auto wagon beside a number of round grain sacks. Then the vehicle moved away from the curb and disappeared in the distance.

If you had asked the two bakery employees about the basket they would have told you it was filled with hot flapjacks and stale doughnuts.

Questioned further, they would tell you the consignment was addressed to "Ford's birds." Thus you would learn one of the interesting things about the bird farm established by Henry Ford, owner of the largest automobile plant in the world and still more talked about through his decision to share $10,000,000 of his profits among his employees.

It is a tale of sentiment out of the practical life of a tall, slim, keen eyed business man. He left his father's farm when he was 16 years old. But now that he is 50 and rich Mr. Ford has gone back to the farm where he was born, built a bungalow for himself and made a little paradise for the birds.

Even in midwinter, when the migration of insectivorous birds has given over the State of Michigan to the bluejays, screech owls and hawks, you can find white breasted nuthatches, downy woodpeckers and larks on the Ford farm. Although the surrounding trees were naked and the underbrush was buried under the white formlessness of snow this count was made one day last month when the daily flapjacks were being hung at a bird feeding station there:

Myrtle warblers, 100.
Song sparrows, 100.
Juncos, 150.
White throated and white crowned sparrows, 40.
Tree sparrows, 100.
Goldfinches, 200.

It is a moot question among ornithologists as to whether insectivorous birds can become granivorous during the winter. But whatever the 'ologists may finally decide, Mr. Ford's bird keepers will tell you that early in March there were known to be at least twenty-two robins on the farm.

Of all the country estates of rich men between Bar Harbor and San Diego Henry Ford's farm is the oddest. It lies ten miles southwest of Detroit at the eastern edge of southern Michigan. Long gone ages which only geologists can tell you about deposited a rich shell marl sediment in layers like a great pile of saucers under all of southern Michigan. The top layer has been eroded by glaciers into a rolling plain punctured by thousands of ponds.

Geologists, pointing for proof to the increasing stagnancy of Saginaw Bay, will further tell you that southern Michigan is rising at the rate of five inches a century. Farmers who a decade ago paid $125 an acre for land which now costs from $150 to $200 will also tell you that land in southern Michigan is rising. For each year these farmers have had to contrive more intensive methods of cultivation until there is now no richer farming district on the continent than the shell marl subsoil of southern Michigan.

Standing timber, tangled with wild grape vines and rising out of a thick undergrowth of mulberries, chokeberries, sumac and blackberries, covers most of Mr. Ford's 2,100 acres. Maples, white oak, basswood, a little hemlock, elm, white pine, linden, poplars, beech, birch, cottonwoods along the streams, willows and walnut give shadow to chipmunks, honeysuckle, weasels, dogwood, woodchucks, asters, rats, viburnum, skunks and rhododendron. A score of ponds have been poured into as many ancient, morainal sink holes. There are hills and glens and some little streams, one of which has been dignified with a name; it is called the Rouge River. There is plenty of color and smell and music on the country estate of Henry Ford of Detroit, but it is the smell of wild flowers and the woods and the flitting color spots of unnumbered birds.

A thorough bird survey of his farm was Mr. Ford's characteristic method of launching his hobby in 1911. It was made by the late Jefferson Butler, secretary of the Michigan Audubon Society, who was an authority on Michigan's wild birds. Its result was the finding of 106 different varieties of birds nesting in the Ford farm.

Acting on Mr. Butler's suggestions Mr. Ford began to equip his farm with over 500 bird boxes. Some of these were small, plain boxes. Some were bored out of logs, like woodpeckers' holes. Some were elaborate colony houses for martins. Many of the boxes were affixed to poles by vertical iron rods so that rats and red squirrels should not be able to disturb nest builders. Other boxes were affixed to stumps and trees and hidden deeply under the thickets of undergrowth. There are no caged birds on Henry Ford's farm.

For the winter shelter of birds which would otherwise migrate rail and cornstalk shelters are built every fall, and after each of them has housed hundreds of birds through the winter they are burned in the spring. These shelters are made by laying on the ground three split rails about three feet apart. Upon these other rails are placed crosswise until there are about six layers.

Other structures of split rails are made until end to end a length of some thirty feet has been attained. Around and on top of the rails clean cornstalks are placed until the rail layers are covered with a thick, warm blanket, which is impervious to water, but through which the birds soon learn to wriggle their way. Food and water are placed inside these shelters, and robins, larks and nuthatches are thereby dissuaded from their winter migrations.

Where the undergrowth has become thin the tops of wild bushes are often tied together to form a more adequate shelter. The autumn fall of leaves is left inviolate on the ground, both as a shelter and a means of giving a warning rustle at the approach of an enemy. Big roots of fallen trees, nest boxes, the thick underbrush and the feeding stations also afford winter protection.

There are fifteen of these feeding stations. All of them are equipped with trays arranged so that the birds can eat in comfort and the food at the same time will be protected from rain and snow. For very shy birds food is thrown on the ground and under the feeding stations.

Around the feeding stations every morning in winter the hot flapjacks and stale doughnuts are hung up on trees and shrubs and their appearance starts a bird riot. Hundreds of noisy, hungry birds quickly tear them to crumbs and the clamor frequently ends in a free for all fight between a score of bluejays and a hundred chickadees and grackles.

On trees near by small cages made of finely meshed wire fencing have been affixed and they are kept filled during the winter with suet, which in a bird's gastronomy takes the place of worms. During the farm's first winter—1911-12—200 pounds of suet was consumed in these small cages. Woodpeckers, nuthatches and chickadees were quick to learn its value, and the bluejays would carry it away in chunks if the wire cages did not prevent.

Tepid water is supplied throughout the winter by an electric heater which has been installed deep in the woods along the Rouge River. Here at a long trough scores of birds bathe and drink side by side, showering each other with warm snow water. Feeders, however, will tell you of a solitary song sparrow which persisted throughout the month of January in bathing amid the ice in the Rouge River.

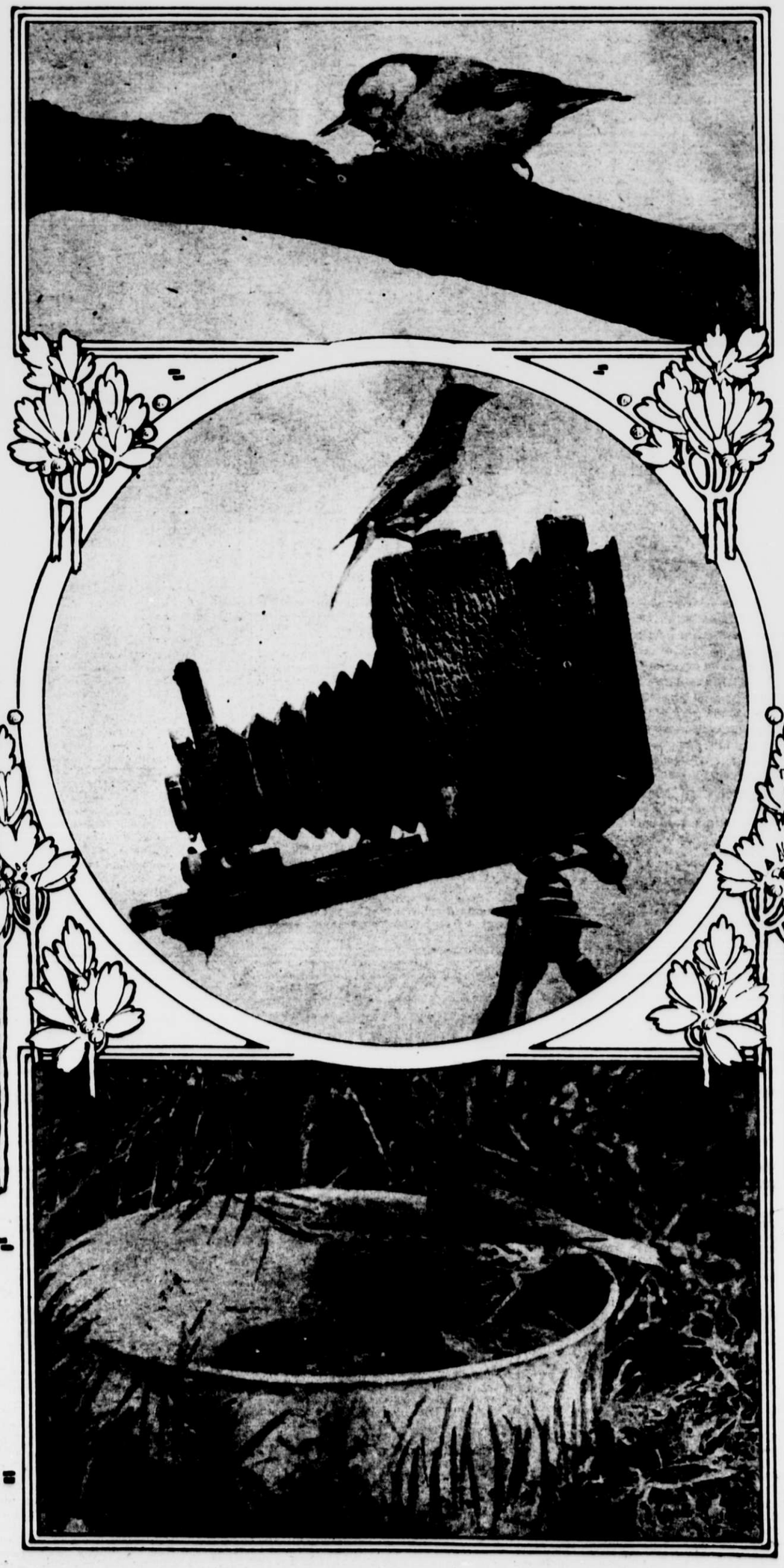
Besides these provisions for food and shelter throughout the winter summer food is supplied by the planting of crops which are allowed to go to seed for the birds. In the open places are patches of sunflowers which hardly have time to ripen before the nuthatches and the finches and the warblers learn to wriggle out the big seeds. For the quail patches of buckwheat are sown. Ten thousand fruit bearing shrubs were planted during the summer of 1911 for the birds. And this in addition to the insects and larvæ which are present in abundance for the feathered folks who live on Ford's farm.

Henry Ford's bird farm has now completed its third winter. It has become the home of every bird variety which is native to Michigan and it has been the means of saving from extermination Michigan's prairie chickens, quail and pheasants. Hundreds of the birds have become tame and a few are absolutely fearless. Pairs of nests can be found in a half hour, but not one of them is allowed to be harmed. In a strip of ground 30 by 300 feet close to his new bungalow Mr. Ford recently found twenty-three nests of fifteen varieties of birds.

So Mr. Ford has sold his town house in Detroit and gone back to the farm where each morning the small grain wagon unloads its round grain sacks and its basket of stale doughnuts and hot flapjacks. During the past year Mr. Ford has taken an increasing interest in the passage of legislation for birds. At present he is interested in the enactment of a treaty with Canada for the further protection of game birds.

And if you were to ask Mr. Ford himself about it he would tell you that he is back on the farm for the rest of his life—back where the blue smoke curls up through the trees, back with the birds.

Henry Ford Will Spend His Life With His Birds on Farm Where He Was Born



Woodthrush.
Top—Nuthatch at feeding station.
Centre—A horned lark, grown tame on Ford's farm.

A bird feeding station.

Pigeon shelter.